

**CONGRESSIONAL TESTIMONY OF ROBERT DAVID HALL
HOUSE GOVERNMENT REFORM
SUBCOMMITTEE ON HUMAN RIGHTS AND WELLNESS
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Good afternoon. I'm Robert David Hall. Some of you may know me as the actor who plays Dr. Robbins, the Medical Examiner on CSI: Crime Scene Investigation. More importantly to these proceedings, I'm also a Board member of the National Organization on Disability, and most importantly, I'm one of our country's 54 million citizens with a disability

It's an honor to speak before you today. I grew up in Washington, so it is nice to come home; and I'm especially grateful for this opportunity to draw attention to the N.O.D./Harris Survey of Americans with Disabilities. To many of us who identify ourselves as People with Disabilities, the N.O.D./Harris Survey is the "gold standard" of surveys. I believe it's an accurate snapshot of what it's like to live as a disabled American. I'm not a statistician or a pollster, but I've learned over the years that numbers and statistics help dictate what action is taken on behalf of any group. While others joining me today are better able to discuss the specifics of this important survey, I would like to speak briefly about my experience as a disability advocate and hands-on volunteer with burn victims and recent amputees. I'd like to paint a picture of myself as a selfless humanitarian, but the truth is, whatever advocacy or volunteer work I've been involved in has given me back far more than I've ever invested.

Twenty-six years ago I was badly burned when an 18-wheel truck ran over my car on a California freeway. My gas tank exploded and I was burned over 65 percent of my body. I spent months in a hospital burn ward and had both legs amputated. Following this trauma, I concluded that I'm not exceptionally brave, but I AM ambitious. I wanted a life, and not just an average life, but something

out of the ordinary. I wanted to succeed, and I didn't want disability or prejudice to stand in my way.

Some people pitied me and some helped me... especially my family and friends. I also helped myself quite a bit. I learned to use assistive technology: prosthetic limbs, hand controls for my car. I re-entered the workplace and began to face certain obstacles that many people with disabilities encounter: accessibility issues, health care concerns, and attitudinal barriers foremost among them. I believe I overcame many of my own challenges, but I didn't do it alone. Many other people with disabilities have fought long and hard to improve life for their peers.

From my own experience, one thing I know very well is the cost of health care with a disability—and how particularly important good health care is to successfully stabilizing a disability so that a person can make the most of life. That is why one section of the N.O.D./Harris Survey of Americans with Disabilities being released today, the section on health care, causes me some particular concern for our community. Twenty-six percent of people with disabilities report not filling a prescription in the last year due to cost. Twenty-eight percent report putting off needed health care last year due to cost. These percentages are about twice as high as for people who don't have disabilities. Cost has also caused 23 percent of people with disabilities to bypass a doctor's recommendation, compared to only nine percent of the non-disabled. About a tenth of people with disabilities say they went without needed physical or speech therapy or mental health services last year.

It is no surprise, then, that the survey also finds people with disabilities have greater fear of losing their independence. Thirty-four fear having to go into a nursing home, compared to six percent of other Americans. About half of all

Americans with disabilities fear they will not be able to take care of themselves or will become a burden to their families, which is twice as great a rate of concern as for other Americans. They are also more worried about losing their health insurance. The more severe their disabilities, the more intense those concerns are. For people with severe disabilities, and especially those who are not independently wealthy, independence is a tenuous asset if it has not already been lost.

The Supreme Court's Olmstead Decision, which had its fifth anniversary this Tuesday, and President Bush's Olmstead Executive Order have helped us. These built on the rights secured by the Americans with Disabilities Act, passed 14 years ago. The ADA has been a milestone piece of legislation, bringing national attention to our concerns, and I commend all the legislators who supported its passage and enforcement. N.O.D. currently supports another piece of legislation that is pending, the Medicaid Community Attendant Services and Supports Act, MiCASSA, that we hope will do much more to ensure freedom for Americans with disabilities and their families. I hope these N.O.D./Harris survey findings will help all our legislators to understand how important this issue is for Americans with disabilities.

When I speak with or visit people who have newly joined the disability community, I become re-energized AND concerned. On a recent visit to injured soldiers at Walter Reed Hospital, I was pleased to see that these young men are receiving first class medical care and the latest in prosthetic equipment. Their spirit, by and large, is extremely positive, and our country is standing by these soldiers by providing them with the assistive technologies that will help them maximize their potential. But, I'm also aware that they have a different life ahead of them. Whether you're a decorated war hero or an average citizen with a disability, you have a gauntlet to run. And as the Harris survey shows, for many,

cost comes between them and the technologies they need. The benefits of assistive technology will not be fully realized so long as cost is a factor keeping people with disabilities from the technologies and devices that will help them lead fuller lives.

Depending on the severity and type of disability that one has, some doors open but certain other doors close. The N.O.D./Harris Survey does a good job of pointing out these societal problems and highlights the real gaps we face as disabled citizens.

One of the interesting findings of this study is that those of us with disabilities are increasingly feeling a common bond or identity with each other. I look forward to the day when the political power of 54 million disabled Americans is truly felt at the ballot box and in these halls.

Whether we're labeled "severely," "moderately," or "slightly" disabled, and no matter what our mental, physical, sensory or psychiatric disability may be, the bottom line, for me anyway, is that there remains discrimination against people who are perceived to be DIFFERENT.

I became involved in disability advocacy for several reasons:

- I'm a person with a disability,

- I faced certain obstacles pursuing my career...

- but mainly because,

I think it's a colossal waste to exclude people from contributing to society based on their "differences"

I mentioned earlier that I grew up in Washington. I'm a baseball fan, a fanatic really. I've got a Washington Senators hat on my bookshelf. I actually left town

the same year Calvin Griffith moved Harmon Killebrew and the Senators to Minnesota. Now, baseball's a lot like life. They tend to do things the way they've always done them. They revere tradition.

In his wonderful book, "Moneyball," Michael Lewis talks about the unorthodox methods used by Oakland Athletics general manager, Billy Beane. Rather than relying strictly on old-school scouting reports and overall physical impressions, Beane selects his ballplayers on the basis of very specific statistical talents. He doesn't care if a member of his club "looks" like a ballplayer, they must perform like one.

Michael Lewis writes:

The inability to envision a certain kind of person doing a certain kind of thing because you've never seen someone who looks like him do it before is not just a vice. It's a luxury. What begins as a failure of the imagination ends as a market inefficiency: when you rule out an entire class of people from doing a job simply by their appearance, you are less likely to find the best person for the job.

I believe that. "You are less likely to find the best person for the job."

I'm playing the coroner on CSI today because a couple of enlightened producers and a network executive saw past my disability and focused on my skills as an actor. This issue, obviously, is much larger than my miniscule problems. As the N.O.D./Harris Survey indicates, there's a large gap in employment between college graduates who do and who do not have disabilities. I think that's a failure of imagination.

I think a greater number of future Doctors, lawyers, CEOs, and Leaders of our

country can and must come from the ranks of Americans with disabilities. Hiring and promoting people who have disabilities is not just the “right” thing to do. It’s the smart thing to do, and it’s good business.

I’m aware that change takes time. I’m also aware that great things start in rooms like this one. Thank you for your time today.